

What is claimed is:

1. A savory, shelf-stable, particulate, meltable, food-grade plasticized composition, said composition having a water activity A_w of 0.70 or below and comprising an oil-in-water emulsion of:
 - a protein that forms a thermally reversible meltable gel;
 - plasticizer components to solubilize the protein, comprising a polyol plasticizer and a non-polyol plasticizer;
 - a level of an edible oil component sufficient to provide proper texture, mouthfeel, and melt characteristics to the plasticized composition; and
 - a savory flavoring component.
2. The savory, shelf-stable composition of claim 1, wherein the water activity is less than or equal to about 0.60.
3. The savory, shelf-stable composition of claim 2, wherein the water activity is less than 0.50.
4. The savory, shelf stable composition of claim 3, wherein the water activity is less than or equal to about 0.43.
6. The savory, shelf-stable composition of claim 1, which comprises 10-30 weight-% protein, 15-50 weight-% plasticizer component, including, based upon the total weight of the composition, 10-40 weight-% polyol plasticizer and 3-15 weight-% non-polyol plasticizer, 10-40 weight-% oil component, 5-25 weight-% moisture, and 10-40 weight-% flavor characterizing component.
7. The savory, shelf-stable composition of claim 6, wherein the protein is casein, the polyol plasticizer is glycerin, the non-polyol plasticizer

is sodium lactate, the oil component is partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, and the flavoring component is a cheese flavor.

8. The savory, shelf-stable composition of claim 7, comprising about 18 weight-% casein, about 21 weight-% glycerin, about 7 weight-% sodium lactate, about 21 weight-% partially hydrogenated soybean oil, and about 24 weight-% cheese component.

9. The savory, shelf-stable composition of claim 6, wherein the protein is casein, the polyol plasticizer is glycerin, the non-polyol plasticizer is sodium lactate, the oil component is stabilized animal fat, and the flavoring component is a meat flavor.

10. The savory, shelf-stable composition of claim 9, comprising about 18 weight-% casein, about 20 weight-% glycerin, about 7 weight-% sodium lactate, about 18 weight-% stabilized animal fat, and about 25 weight-% meat extract and seasoning component.

11. The savory, shelf-stable composition of claim 6, wherein the protein is casein, the polyol plasticizer is glycerin, the non-polyol plasticizer is comprised of monosaccharides originating from the vegetable component, the oil component is partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, and the flavoring component is a vegetable flavor.

12. The savory, shelf-stable composition of claim 11, comprising about 20 weight-% casein, about 17 weight-% glycerin, about 35 weight-% flavor characterizing vegetable component, about 20 weight-% partially hydrogenated soybean oil, and about 8 weight-% salt and seasoning component.

13. A process for producing a low-water-activity shelf-stable particulate edible food-grade plasticized composition having a savory inclusion and designed to be melted onto snack foods and the like, said process comprising the steps of:

combining a protein that forms a thermally reversible meltable gel, plasticizer components including a polyol plasticizer and a non-polyol plasticizer, an edible oil, a savory inclusion, and water in an amount that provides a water activity A_w of 0.70 or less;

heating the combined components under agitation to solubilize the protein, establish a homogenous oil-in-water emulsion, and provide a cooked gel product;

casting and cooling the cooked gel product; and

shredding or grinding the cast cooked gel product for consumption.

14. The process of claim 13, wherein process is a batch process and the heating under agitation is conducted in a scraped-wall, pressure-jacketed, steam-heated vat.

15. The process of claim 13, wherein the process is a continuous process and the heating under agitation is conducted in a scraped-wall, pressure-jacketed, steam-heated vat into which the components of the composition are fed by means of a positive displacement stuffing pump.

16. The process of claim 13, wherein the process is a continuous process and the casting and cooling step is conducted on a revolving belt equipped with a gauging roller that establishes product depth and equipped with a cooling medium on its non-product-contact surface side to effect conductive cooling.

17. The process of claim 13, wherein 10-30 parts by weight protein is combined with 10-40 parts by weight polyol plasticizer, 3-15 parts by weight non-polyol plasticizer, 10-40 parts by weight oil component, 10-40 parts by weight flavoring component, and water in an amount that provides a cast cooked gel product having a water activity A_w of less than about 0.50.